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Interior Secretary Zinke Connects With Local Communities in Protected Lands

Trump's mandate to review monuments leads Montana native to rural workers and businesses seeking alternative uses for designated areas

By Jim Carlton • Updated Sept. 4, 2017 12:20 p.m. ET

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke made sure during his trip in Oregon to meet with ranchers, loggers and other people whose jobs have been hurt by recent national monument designations. Photo: Jim Carlton/The Wall Street Journal

ASHLAND, Ore.—On a dirt road high on a mountain near here, the secretary of Interior unfolded his 6-foot-2-inch frame out of a dusty black Suburban one morning recently and started shaking hands with a group of ranchers in cowboy hats.

“The president has made it clear—I work for you,” Ryan Zinke told the ranchers, who had gathered to tell him their grazing operations would be hurt by a recent expansion of Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

The appearance by a top federal official was well received. “No one has come out here before,” said rancher Jeremy Kennedy. “We finally have a voice.”

Mr. Zinke's July 15 visit was part of a marathon fact-finding trip the secretary has undertaken since President Donald Trump directed him in May to review 22 land monuments and five ocean preserves—most created or expanded by former presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—for possible downsizing or elimination.

On Aug. 24, Mr. Zinke sent the president his recommendations in a report that hasn't yet been made public. However, Mr. Zinke suggested several monuments would face potential downsizing, after saying in a statement that his recommendations will “provide a much-needed change for the local communities who border and rely on these lands for hunting and fishing, economic development, traditional uses, and recreation.”

Mr. Zinke, 54 years old, a former Navy SEAL commander who joined the Trump cabinet after serving as a Republican congressman in his native Montana since 2015, said he wants to tip the balance of who gets heard on land-use decisions more in favor of rural people whose jobs often are affected by the decisions.

In the field, he has spent extensive amounts of time with some of the people most affected by monument designations and who oppose them because of restrictions that often curtail traditional jobs such as ranching and logging. “The president directed me to give America a voice (and) a lot of the anger has been that they haven't had a voice,” the Interior secretary said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal, which was allowed to accompany him on the Oregon visit.

In so doing, Mr. Zinke is helping protect a key flank of Mr. Trump's support as the president has faced political crises on myriad fronts.

But Mr. Zinke has infuriated environmentalists and other proponents of more conservation, who call him a tool of industry. They say his other actions to expand drilling on public lands and in offshore waters from Alaska to the Gulf

of Mexico are payback to backers of his congressional campaign, which have included oil-and-gas companies. They also accuse him of stacking the Interior Department with industry executives and lobbyists.

“If you look at the decisions he has made, they have been for single use,” said Chris Saeger, executive director of the Western Values Project, a conservation group based in Mr. Zinke’s hometown of Whitefish, Mont. “He is opening more land for oil and gas development.

The Interior secretary, however, said his goal is to manage public lands under the principle of multiple uses including industry, as he said was put forth by Gifford Pinchot, who was appointed the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905. Mr. Zinke said his meetings with ranchers, loggers and others who make their living off the land are intended to include a group he says that has often been ignored by federal policy makers in recent decades.

“I hear over and over, ‘I’ve never seen the secretary of the Interior,’” Mr. Zinke said.

He added that he also meets with all sides on various issues, including environmentalists and their supporters. “Everyone we meet, there’s more in common than differences,” he said.

Mr. Zinke’s management style could be seen on his cross-country trips to review the monuments. Over the past four months, the Interior secretary has crisscrossed the country, touring everything from the North Woods of Maine to the sunbaked desert of Nevada. In May, he undertook the first tour for his review—of the 1.35 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument—by helicopter, on foot and horseback.

As with many of the trips, the secretary drew criticism for spending most of his touring time with people opposed to the monument—in this case including local San Juan County commissioner and Utah state lawmakers. Ordered by the president to report back first on that monument, Mr. Zinke in June

recommended it be shrunk to cover only the most valued areas such as Native American cliff art.

While he drew criticism for not spending more time with supporters of the monument—one Navajo woman engaged in a shouting match with him at one trailhead—residents of nearby Blanding, Utah, where the Bears Ears monument is widely opposed, brandished signs thanking Mr. Zinke for his visit at a rally.

“We know he is the possible answer to our prayers to get out of bondage from the federal government,” Merri Shumway, a 55-year-old local school board member, said at the event.

At 112,000 acres, the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument is far smaller but no less divisive, as Mr. Zinke found on his visit here in late July. President Clinton designated 52,000 acres as a national monument in 2000, citing the area’s unique biodiversity from being at the intersection of three mountain ranges: the Cascade, Siskiyou and Klamath. Another 13,000 acres were added in recent years through private land acquisitions. Among other attributes, the mountainous region is home to one of the U.S.’s biggest gatherings of butterflies.

In the week before he left office, President Obama added another 47,000 acres to the refuge—extending it into a part of Northern California—after environmentalists lobbied for wider protection in an area they say is vulnerable to impacts from climate change, among other things.

Loggers and ranchers cried foul, saying the expanded monument would limit their operations. Before meeting with anyone, the Interior secretary opted to do what he often does—explore the land on foot, greeting sometimes startled hikers along the way. “Everybody grab some rocks to carry—the SEAL in me says this can’t be fun,” Mr. Zinke, wearing boots and khakis, joked as he prepared to lead an entourage of monument employees on a 2-mile hike.

Along the way, he greeted hikers by saying “Hi, I’m Ryan” and offering his

hand. The exchanges were mostly amiable, except this one: “I know your boss is not a fan of the environment, or a fan of the planet,” Dan Roper, a 34-year-old environmental activist from Ashland, Ore., said to Mr. Zinke at the end of the trail. Mr. Zinke shot back, “Who said that?”

Next, he drove out to meet with executives of Murphy Co., a local timber firm with about 4,000 of 50,000 wooded acres in the area enclosed or adjacent to the expanded monument where logging is now more restricted. The firm filed suit in federal court challenging the expansion, but a judge postponed any action on the case until after Mr. Zinke’s review.

“We think we have been harmed,” John Murphy, the firm’s president, said as the Interior secretary nodded.

A few miles away, Mr. Zinke met with the ranchers, and climbed into the passenger seat of Mr. Bradshaw’s pickup truck to get a windshield look of how the larger monument stands to affect him. Mr. Bradshaw explained to the secretary that half of the 10,000 public acres he has grazing rights to run his cattle now lie within the borders, threatening the viability of a ranch that has been in operation for decades.

Mr. Zinke told Mr. Bradshaw and the other ranchers at one point: “The thing is you maintain biodiversity by science and best practices, and past use is part of that.”

By late afternoon, Mr. Zinke adjourned to a cabin resort on nearby Hyatt Lake, where commissioners from three surrounding counties pressed their case to rescind the expanded monument. “Up front, I’m a multiuse guy,” the secretary told the commissioners from a chair on a cabin porch.

While Mr. Zinke didn’t commit to what he would recommend, the commissioners left more hopeful. “He’s from rural America and he understands rural America,” said Klamath County Commissioner Derrick DeGroot. “This is a perfect fit for us to be heard.”

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